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ABSTRACT

The intergenerational field began in the early 1970s as a social phenomenon in response to several factors that were affecting America's children, youth, and older adults. This paper briefly surveys three aspects of intergenerational programs: history and development, public policy focus, and recent research initiatives. The multi-disciplinary nature of the intergenerational human service field, the interdisciplinary aspect of the academic fields it embraces, and its theoretical grounding suggest the timeliness for consideration of intergenerational studies as an emerging discipline. (Contains 17 references. (BT)



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HISTORY AND CURRENT STATUS OF THE INTERGENERATIONAL FIELD

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FOR

HOGG SYMPOSIUM

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HISTORY AND CURRENT STATUS OF THE INTERGENERATIONAL FIELD

The intergenerational field began in the early 1970's as a social phenomenon in response to several societal factors that were affecting our country's children, youth and older adults. Factors such as demographic trends, family structures, economic pressures and residential and recreational patterns seemed to be having a strong negative impact on the two generations at the opposite ends of the human continuum.

These factors contributed to generational separation, an increase in age-segregated communities, and a consequent decrease in intergenerational exchange.

During the past several decades, there has been a demographic shift. Older adults over 60 are increasing in numbers, and now represent almost 20% of the population. Children and youth, on the other hand, now comprise less than 20% families - single and two-parent - away from their elder members because of economic needs.

We have seen furthermore the growth of communities "exclusively for older adults" typically long distances from the family's roots. The increase in nuclear families geographically separated from their elder family members, the increase in retirement communities, the expansion of institutional care for the frail elderly, and the entrenchment of separate recreational centers for seniors and youth are all factors contributing to an age-segregated society.

In observing these factors, gerontologists, psychologists, child development and adult development specialists and educators began to discuss issues related to generational isolation. These issues included reduced nurturing of children by the family's grandparents (who historically have been nurturers), the loss of meaningful roles for older adults in the family and the community, a reduction in the transfer of culture and values and the loss of special insights and knowledge children traditionally gained from older family members.

Human service professionals connected these social issues to some emerging problems facing our older adults, children and youth. Older adults were dealing with problems of loneliness, loss of self-esteem, and reduced satisfaction with life; children and youth were displaying problems of low self-esteem, lack of motivation, loss of cultural identity, and feelings of intergenerational disconnectedness. Additionally, both populations were evidencing increased misperceptions about each other.

Recognition of these generation-specific problems resulted in the development of an operational framework to address the social issues causing these problems. This framework consisted of intergenerational programs, which were designed to create opportunities for positive intergenerational exchange between non-biologically connected older and younger persons. Human service providers, grass-roots community organizations and public and private agencies became involved in the development of programs to ameliorate some of the problems associated with generational distancing by linking the oldest and youngest generations.

Several fundamental premises have spawned the development of these programs and the subsequent creation of a new human service field. There is an historical and developmental rationale for linking these two generations. Richard Kalish in his classic paper "Old and the Young as Generation Gap Allies," describes the special commonalities of these two populations in the context of their role and place in society i.e. their lack of productivity and their dependence on the middle generation. (Kalish, 1969) Eric Kingson in his book *The Ties That Bind* presents a case for the interdependence of these two generations and their need to advocate for their mutual economic, social and cultural survival. (Kingson, 1986)

Intergenerational programs are grounded in the notion that there is a special synergy between the old and the young, that caring for each other is both natural and appropriate and that there are shared needs that can be met by making connections between these generations. The intergenerational paradigm is further supported by child development theory, which asserts that children and youth need nurturers, positive role models, a sense of identity, a secure value system, recognition of their worth and a sense of their place in history. Adult development theory also suggests that older adults need to nurture, a purpose theory also suggests that older adults need to nurture, a purpose for existence and a sense of identity, recognition of their worth and a desire to leave a legacy for future generations.

During the 70's and early 80's, we witnessed a proliferation of intergenerational program models, involving the interaction of older adults (both well and frail) and children and youth from infants through college age. These program models, shaped to meet some of the developmental and emotional needs of these two generations, were in evidence throughout the country in such diverse settings as nursing home, personal care and adult day care homes, schools, child care

centers, libraries and community centers. A variety of program models emerged in which children, youth and older adults were engaged in on-going activities that yielded positive results for both populations. Since the 70's this basic framework has shaped thousands of programs involving grass roots initiatives and large-system public and private collaborations.

Though the initial motivation for these models was to meet the need for generational linkages, intergenerational programs are currently emerging as a vehicle to address a variety of other pressing social issues.

Intergenerational programs are being developed to address issues of school drop-out, inadequate child care, employment for older adults, violence in the community, and substance abuse. With this new focus, the programmatic aspect of this field now involves the collaboration of public and private systems and agencies that serve the young and the old at local, state and national levels.

The intergenerational field now extends beyond program development to include public policy initiatives, as intergenerational considerations become integrated into state and federal government legislative activities. Evidence of the intergenerational field in the public policy arena can be found in the ABC Child Care bill of 1992 that addresses older workers as child care providers, the Education 2000 legislation that includes older adults as mentors, the National Community Service Legislation in 1993 that supports service provided by older and younger persons to their communities and now the 1995 White House Conference on Aging that includes the interdependence of generations as a central theme.

Concurrent with the development of this new human service field and its public policy focus is the growth of a body of knowledge that describes the development and results of intergenerational programs.

As professionals in multi disciplinary fields begin examining the impact of these programs, they are also conducting the seminal research in the field. This research is as varied as the people who are performing it, representing fields such as early childhood, aging, education, human development and psychology. The research addresses a variety of fundamental questions related to attitudes, behaviors, interactions, learning and quality of life.

Studies of Chapman and Neal (1990), and Seefeldt (1982, 1984) have examined the impact of intergenerational activities on children's attitudes toward the elderly as well as older

adults attitudes toward children. The works of Kuehne (1989) and of Lambert, et al. (1990) have resulted in separate taxonomies of positive and negative behaviors of young children interacting with older adults. Ward, et al. (1996) have investigated the impact of children on the observed behaviors of older adults with Alzheimer's Disease. In another area, Newman, et al. (1994) have reported on studies involving older adults as workers in child care settings.

Research in the areas of learning includes the work of Hamon and Koch (1993) on the effects of an intergenerational mentoring program and students, and the work of Newman and Karip (1995) on older adults' memory function as volunteers in school settings. Though the field's research is still limited, it involves diverse methods and includes both quantitative and quality designs.

The availability of information on the history and development of intergenerational programs, its public policy focus, and the research initiatives have motivated interest among some faculty in child development, human development, gerontology, psychology, and education, prompting the development of courses and other university experiences that focus on the emerging intergenerational field.

I believe that the multi-disciplinary nature of the intergenerational human service field, the interdisciplinary aspect of the academic fields it embrace, and its theoretical grounding suggests the timeliness for consideration of intergenerational studies as an emerging discipline.

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